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## STRESS AND BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS AMONG VISUALLY IMPAIRED AND NON-IMPAIRED ADOLESCENTS: GRADE AND GENDER DIFFERENCES

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### Abstract

This study attempted to compare the stress perception and behavioural problems between visually impaired and non-impaired adolescents and also examined the nature of relationship between these two variables. Educational level and gender differences were also analyzed. A total of 79 visually impaired and 111 non-impaired were included. They were between 13-21 years of age and majority of them were from low and low-middle class family background. The students having more than one impairment were not included in the visually impaired category. After necessary modifications, Hopkins' Symptom Checklist (1974) was used to measure stress and teachers were asked to rate students' frequently occurring behavioural problems. Results showed that the visually impaired were significantly less stressed than the non-impaired counterparts irrespective of their educational level and gender. Correlations between stress and behavioural problems were found significant for visually impaired and non-impaired males and females in different grades. Results have been discussed in the light of cognitive appraisal theory of stress, school placement and other relevant explanations.

### Introduction

Life events themselves are not necessarily stress producing (Lazrus, 1978; Cohen; 1985) rather, their cognitive appraisal is central to it. Cognitive appraisal depends upon many factors like, person's emotional and social maturity, social and financial background, gender, age and experience in similar situations, education, physical and mental capacity and the perceived social support around him/her. The aversive and threatening experiences from the stage specific stressors at adolescence become cumulatively active in interaction with the presence of impairment. Thus, as the environment and the impairment both impose certain limitations on the impaired children, the number and effects of different stressors become multiplicative.

The unexpressed feeling of loss of sight was found to be frequently associated with helplessness, inferiority, mobility related stress and anxiety,

depression, less self-efficacy and poor performance (Dodds, Bailey, Pearson & Yates, 1991). A number of researchers in recent years observed positive relationship of visual impairment with psychological distress, loneliness, tension, nervousness (Karlson, 1998) and maladjustment (Agarwal & Kaur, 1985; Qadari & Hussain, 1982; Pandey, 1985; Banerjee, 1988). Contrary to this, some studies did not report any significant association between these two (Sinha, 1982; Hassan, Khan & Khan, 1983; Sastry, 1985; Haider, 1990). Similarly, Agarwal and Powar (1981) reported not significant difference in the level of stress of blind and sighted school students but Yamamoto, Soliman, Pearsons & Davis (1987) studied stressful life events of 1814 (3<sup>rd</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grade) blind children in six countries and reported blindness was perceived that stressful universally.

A number of studies have shown that inability to manipulate the personal and environmental variables increase the stress vulnerability and maladjustment and results in behavioural problems (Shimada, Sakano and Agari, 1955). Systematic studies on common behaviours found among these students still contended that they were more reserved and shy in nature (Bharadwaj, 1995), immature (Pandey, 1985) restrained, worried and untidy (Bala, 1985), depressed (WenzGross ad Siperstein, 1993) as compared to other non-impaired counterparts. Jindal-Snape, Kato and Maekawa (1998) reported these children having deficits in social skills that placed them at risk for problem behaviours and this has been supported by Sharma, Sigafos and Can-oil (2000) contending these children had problems in developing social skills and establishing friendship (Rosenblum, 2000) that resulted in some behavioural problems.

Perspectives differed from one study to another, yet highlighted that the visually impaired exhibited more stress, less adjustment and more behavioral problems than their non-impaired counterparts, though few contradicting studies had their own strengths, thus, made the research evidence inconclusive. Adolescence being a stage of tremendous physical, cognitive and affective changes presumably would put all visually impaired and non-impaired adolescents to quantitatively and qualitatively different levels of stress and to exhibit different types and number of behavioural problems. The study thus focused on a comparison of the visually impaired and non-impaired on stress and behavioural problems and addressed the issues related to educational grade and gender.

**Stress and Behavioural Problems Among Visually Impaired and Non-impaired  
Adolescents: Grade and Gender Differences**

### **Method**

**Selection of Schools:** Since there were very few schools providing education to the visually impaired students at SS III level, the option to select schools was limited to **two residential special schools** only. As the number of students were also less, the **scope of selecting students** on the basis (e.g partial or total blindness or on **degrees of visual impairment**) was also very difficult. St. Joseph's centre for the **visually handicapped**, Obudu, the only boys, Senior Secondary, **Special Girls School Ogoja**, the only girls secondary special school was included. Both were **Catholic Mission Schools** and take SSCE/NECO Examinations conducted for **SSIII students**. A Community Secondary School in a slightly underdeveloped area (**Gabu in Yala**), was included to decrease the gap in socio-economic status of **both the groups**.

### **Sample**

A total of 79 **visually impaired** (class SS II 39 and SS III 40, male 36 and female 43) and non impaired (class SS II 62 and SS III 49, male 63 and female 48) were included. They were **between 13-21 years of age** and majority of them from low and middle **class family background**. The students having additional impairment were not **included in the visually impaired category**.

### **Variables and Tools:**

Stress was **defined here as a manifestation** of imbalance between internal resources and **external demands** in the form of somatization, obsessive compulsive behaviour, **interpersonal sensitivity**, depression and anxiety. After the pilot study and **necessary modifications** Hopkins' Symptom Checklist (1974) was used to measure **students' stress**. A total of 30 modified items (originally 45 items) spread over five **dimensions of somatization** (8 items), obsessive-compulsive thoughts (7 items), **interpersonal sensitivity** (5 items), anxiety (5 items) and depression (7 items) **were retained**. The scale used a four-point response format ranging from "**not at all true for me**" to **extremely true for me**". A high score indicated high stress. **Cronbach reliability of this scale** was 0.74.

### **Behavioural problems:**

**Teachers were asked to report any thing** that they observed and considered as **behaviour problems** in the students. These were screened and used to **categorize students into three categories**, those having more than three problems

scored as (1) less than 3 as (2) and no behaviour problem as (3). A high score indicated fewer behavioural problems.

**Procedure:**

Questionnaire was constructed and validated after pilot test and the reliability of the scale was 0.95. Questionnaires were administered orally to the visually impaired students on a structured interview schedule. In case of the non-impaired students, questionnaires were administered in small groups.

**Table 1: Mean and SD Scores on Stress**

		SS II	SS III	Male	Female	Total
Visually Impaired	M	52.23	46.43	<b>45.69</b>	<b>52.3</b>	<b>49.29</b>
	SD	9.19	11.38	<b>8.48</b>	11.50	10.7
Non-Impaired	M	50.32	59.08	<b>53.75</b>	<b>54.77</b>	<b>54.2</b>
	SD	11.08	<b>13.93</b>	<b>12.4</b>	14.1	13.11

NOTE: Secondary Scholl indicated high stress

**Table 2: Mean and SD Scores on Behavioural Problems**

		SS II	SS III	Male	Female	Total
Visually Impaired	M	2.52	2.05	2.25	2.28	2.30
	SD	.59	.80	.77	.77	.77
Non-Impaired	M	<b>1.47</b>	.98	1.16	1.38	1.25
	SD	<b>.65</b>	.92	.77	.87	.81

NOTE: Secondary Scholl indicated high stress

**Table 3: Results of t test by Class and Gender**

Categories	Stress	Behavioural Problems
VI vs NI	t = 2.68, p < .01	t = 8.58, p < .01
VI-SS II vs NI-SSII	t = .90, p > .01	t = 7.23, p < .01
VI-SIII vs NI-SSIII	t = 4.62, p < .01	t = 6.16, p < .01
VI-M vs NI-M	t = 3.64, p < .01	t = 6.80, p < .01
VI-F vs NI-F	t = 0.91, p > .01	t = 5.41, p < .01

ABBREVIATIONS: VI - Visually Impaired, NI - Non Impaired, SSII - Grade II, SSIII - Grade III, M - Male, F - Female

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**Results**

The data in first three tables revealed that the visually impaired were significantly less stressed than the non-impaired ( $MS_{VINI} = 49.29$ ,  $MS_{NI} = 54.2$ , and  $t = 2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ), which was really surprising. Despite of their impairment specific problems they were less stressed hence, exhibited significantly fewer behavioural problems than their non-impaired counterparts ( $MS_{VI} = 2.41$ ,  $MS_{NI} = 1.47$ ; and  $t = 2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ). While visually impaired ( $MS_{VI} = 52.23$ ) and non-impaired ( $MS_{NI} = 50.32$ ) in grade SSII were equally stressed, SSIII non-impaired ( $MS_{NI} = 59.08$ ) were significantly more stressed ( $t = 4.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than their visually impaired counterparts ( $MS_{VI} = 46.43$ ). However, SS II and SS III adolescents with vision impairment exhibited significantly fewer behavioural problems ( $MS_{VI} = 2.41$ ) and  $MS_x = 2.15$  for the visually impaired) ( $t = 7.23$ ,  $p < .01$  between grade SSIII students;  $t = 6.16$ ,  $p < .01$  between grade X students) than their counterparts in the non-impaired category significantly less stressed ( $t = 3.64$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than the non-impaired males ( $MS_{NIM} = 53.75$ ), hence, the former group ( $MS_{VM} = 2.25$ ) also exhibited significantly fewer behavioural problems ( $t = 6.8$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, though females in both categories ( $MS_{VIP} = 52.3$ ,  $MS_{NIF} = 54.77$ ) were equally stressed ( $t = 0.91$ ,  $p > .01$ ), but those in non-impaired category ( $MS_{NIF} = 1.38$ ) exhibited significantly more behavioural problems ( $t = 5.41$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than the other group ( $MS_{VIF} = 2.28$ )

Table 4: Correlation between Stress and Behavioural Problem

Categories	Correlation Coefficients
Visually Impaired	<b>-46, p &lt; .01</b>
Grade SS II	<b>-36, p &lt; .01</b>
Grade SS III	<b>-65, p &lt; .01</b>
Male -	<b>-48, p &lt; .01</b>
Female -	<b>-52, p &lt; .01</b>
Non-Impaired	<b>-50, p &lt; .01</b>
Grade SS II	<b>-25, p &lt; .05</b>
Grade SS III	<b>-69, p &lt; .01</b>
Male -	<b>-40, p &lt; .01</b>
Female -	<b>-71, p &lt; .01</b>

### Correlational Analysis

Findings on correlations (table 4) revealed that for the total sample of visually impaired and non-impaired ( $r = 0.46, p < .01$ ;  $r = 0.50, p < .01$ ) as well as for all subgroups the relationship between stress and behavioural problem was negative and significant. No differences were found on the basis of impairment, grade and gender. This indicated that those who were more stressed exhibited more behavioural problems (this is negatively coded, see the caption under table 2).

Table 5: Correlation of Background Variables with Stress and Behavioural Problems

		A	AGO	SIB	MED	FED	MOC	FOC	FIN
STR	VI	-.20	0.09	.10	-.26*	-.24*	-.06	-.28**	-.23*
	NI	.09	—	.06	-.06	-.08	.05	.03	.14
BP	VI	-.19	-.15	-.02	.05	.07	.09	.08	.10
	NI	-.03	—	-.04	-.01	-.10	.21*	-.06	-.26**

ABBREVIATIONS: STR - Stress, BP - Behavioural Problem, VI - Visually Impaired, NI - Non Impaired, A - Age, AGO - Age of Onset of Disability, SIB - Number of Siblings, MED - Mothers education, FED - Fathers education, MOC - Mothers Occupation, FOC - Fathers Occupation, FIN - Family's Monthly Income, + =  $p < .05$ , and \*\* =  $p < .01$

Results on relationship between stress and background variables (table 5) presented rather an unexpected finding, revealing the parent's education ( $r = -0.26$  and  $r = -0.24, p < .05$ ), father's occupation ( $r = -0.28, p < .01$ ) and family's income ( $r = -0.23, p < .05$ ) reduced stress feeling of the visually impaired, but not a single variable was found to have significant relationship with stress for the non-impaired. Similarly, the non-impaired adolescents whose mothers were in better occupation ( $r = -.21, p < .05$ ) and those students from families having better financial condition ( $r = 0.26, p < .01$ ) exhibited fewer behavioural problems for the visually impaired group. Age of onset of disability and severity of impairment neither correlated with stress or with behavioural problems

### Discussion

The finding of low stress among the visually impaired was interesting, unexpected and was also contrary to the common belief and research findings which reported either no significant difference (Agarwal & Powar, 1981), or found the visually impaired more stressed (Yamamoto, Soliman, Pearsons & Davis, 1987). Perhaps the sheltered atmosphere of residential schools made visually impaired students less apprehensive, less threatened, emotionally secured and less socially rejected. It seemed that the habitational situation, confident in independent daily living skills in familiar and relatively simple physical social environment gave them adequate

non-impaired adolescents exhibited these behavioural problems quite frequently according to their teachers. The teachers reported their behaviours and activities inside the classroom uncontrollable and unmanageable. This perhaps affected the ratings made by the teachers. Many of the behavioural problems could be attributed to their social background, as majority of them were from slum type environment, with some having small shop keeper and petty trader backgrounds. Their efforts focused little on school activities resulting in more behavioural problems in the school. Whereas, what mattered in describing visually impaired students' behaviour was the quantity and quality of social interactions between them and the teachers as the raters. The teacher perceived the visually impaired as more obeying, less aggressive and more stable in their social and emotional behaviour as a result of their good social-interactions with teachers.

The finding of significant inverse correlation between stress and behavioral problems (was negatively coded) for all students was also reported by Compas, Davis, Forsythy and Wagner (1987) indicating that higher stress perhaps lowered down one's positive self-esteem and overall adjustment, hence, resulted in more number of behavioural problems.

Findings on the association of background variables with stress and behavioural problems highlighted the importance of parent's education, occupation and income in the stress perception of their offspring. Apparently, good educational and financial background provided more ways to the visually impaired adolescents to cope with impairment related stress and their outcomes. Researchers have always emphasized the multiple pathways by which the environmental/social stressors could increase the risk of psychological well-being (Kessler, 1979; Thoits, 1983; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1984; & Kluwin, 1987). Presumably, the cumulative effects of contextual stressors could become more severe in the presence of vision loss as it could heighten the sense of helplessness and loss of control as background to be more anxious.

## Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from the present study:

1. The non-impaired adolescents were more stressed and exhibited more behavioural problems than the visually impaired.
2. High stress resulted in more behavioural problems among the visually impaired as well as the non-impaired.



**opportunity** to share their fears and anxiety with a homogenous peer group and **thus** perceived life as less stressful. Secondly, as they are living in residential schools, they had little mobility, which could be another reason of their lesser stress perception. This was consistent with the finding of Seybold (1993) who reported that the major causes of stress and anxiety in visually impaired persons were inadequate information about the nature of orientation and mobility combined with a sense of social isolation. In addition to lesser mobility, school regulations could have helped them to develop necessary orientation and mobility skills to cope with daily life hassles. It was also observed that whenever these children went out they preferred to stay in groups, which helped them to reduce anxiety and insecurity feelings that might have occurred if they were not in a group. Another plausible explanation could be their inability to perceive people's body language. Visual inputs had always proved quite powerful in creating stress. As these were absent in case of the visually impaired adolescents, the source of stress was reduced to a minimum.

In terms of the cognitive appraisal and other theories of stress (Mechanic, 1962; and Lazarus, 1978) observed that stress occurred when there was some discrepancy between individual's perception of the environmental demands and one's perceived ability to meet or cope with that demand. McGrath (1976) observed that the experienced ability to meet or cope with perceived demand and ability were closely matched, as in such a situation the individual was not sure about his/her capacity to meet environmental demands. Perhaps, the non-impaired appraised these events as an imbalance between their perceived ability and perceived demand and the higher uncertainty was followed by failure to respond effectively and resulting in higher stress.

The finding of more behavioural problems in non-impaired as compared to visually impaired adolescents was in line with other researches. Okayasu, Shimada, Nwa, Mori and Yotomi (1992) contented that high school students' stressful daily activities comprised of five main factors; school work, club activities, relationships with teachers and peers, school regularity, and financial and social constraints faced in the family, manifested in various behavioural problems, such as impulsivity, misbehaving, ill mannerism, lying, disinterest in studies, disobedient, high inattentiveness, absenteeism, argumentative behaviour etc. (Rutter, 1986; Compas, Davis, Forsythy & Wagner, 1987). The

3. Better socio-economic status and many background variables resulted in lowering down of stress perception in the visually impaired, whereas only better occupation of mothers and better family income reduced behavioural problems among the non-impaired.

The findings basically highlighted the importance of stress management, family education for adolescents in schools having impaired students as well as students from low socio-economic family background. Adolescents at secondary education level should be sensitized about the nature and variety of stressors to be faced, impact of these stressors on body and mind, the intervening factors, relation of these with academic performance, practical ways of coping, and the information about available social support more frequently with the help of professional experts at the beginning of early adolescent stage (Sakano, Sato, Matsumoto & Suzuki, 1998). They should be taught relaxation training including progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training and other relaxation techniques, such as Zen and Yoga. School counseling might help them to understand and identify stressors correctly, to learn strategies of cognitive self-control for modifying the appraisals of the harmfulness of the stimuli, of dysfunctional thoughts, raising self-efficacy for problem solving and controllability, maintaining self-confidence, and the modification of beliefs of perceived social support during stressful situations.

There is a critical need for awareness and education of parents and the community on the psychological well-being of their children, as they have powerful sources of stress. Teachers should be especially trained at teacher counselor, which could result in right understanding and diagnosis of the problem at the right time, appropriate psychological assessment and counseling to the needy students. The recent National Assembly Bill on the disabled is a step in the right direction.

However, future research is desirable wherein visually impaired students from both integrated/non-integrated and residential school settings, and the non-impaired from public/private schools may be included in order to widen the scope of generalizability of findings of the present study. Background variables should be extended by including family support, sibling peer supports, etc.; which could account for stress in adolescents, especially with vision impairment.

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